PLEASURE AND PROFIT
IN JOURNALISM

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PLEASURE AND PROFIT IN JOURNALISM

By Patrick T. Keily.

Taken from the Tribune for January and February, 1932.

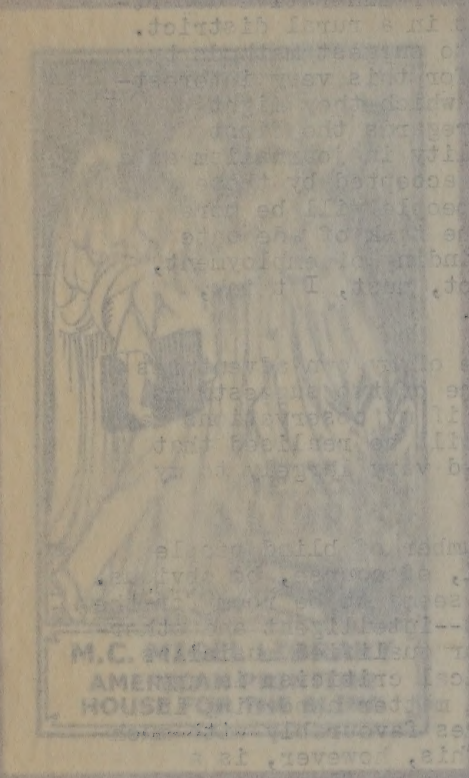
I. Some General Observations.

Considerable interest having been aroused from time to time in my operations as a journalist--in connection with which, I believe, I have cut some new ground in occupation for the blind,--I am glad to have an opportunity of saying something with regard to the line of work which, since the war, has more and more proved the most remunerative department of my somewhat varied activities in a rural district. I am not going to attempt, however, to suggest methods by which blind people could be trained for this very interesting work, or to formulate schemes by which they might afterwards be found employment. As regards the first of these considerations, if the possibility in journalism as a suitable occupation for the blind is accepted by those who undertake their tra ning, these people will be more competent than myself to undertake the task of adequate preparation; while, as regards the finding of employment, most journalists, whether blind or not, must, I think, show initiative on their own account.

I am simply going to recall some of my own adventures in journalism, as well as to offer one or two suggestions which might not be out of place; and if my observations may seem very personal, I trust that it will be realised that my knowledge of the subject is limited very largely to my own personal experiences.

My strong belief that quite a number of blind people might do something in journalism will, of course, be obvious. Its avenues are so varied that there seems to be room for the expression of almost any set of ideas--intelligent and otherwise. I imagine that not a few of our qualified musicians could do something in the w y of musical criticism in any fairly large centre; for the critical matter appearing in the "Braille Musical Magazine" compares favourably with much that one reads in the daily press. This, however, is a sphere of journalism which has little or no financial value in a rural district.

Some of our literary friends, too, might find an outlet for their efforts through a section of the press; but in this connection it must be emphasised that the subject dealt with has to be one of somewhat general interest. I remember myself writing an article on "Blindness in Literature," which received the approval of a literary friend to whom I showed it; and it was on her advice that I made bold to send it to "John O'London". In the cours of a little while it came back, with the usual editorial note of regret, just a printed slip which must never discourage the would-be journalist. I realised that, however, interesting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the subject was to me, it was one which the average reader cared little about, and for which, therefore, the editor had little use. In such a case the professional journalist must look for some more probable outlet for his effort, and in this instance it was "The Tribune" through which I was ultimately allowed to express myself, and which, I am grateful to record, treated my article professionally.

But, apart from the more specialised types of journalism, some of our friends, more especially, perhaps, some living in smaller towns, might add to their incomes as the local reporter to some paper serving their area. It need not concern one whether he is regarded as a mere penny-a-liner, a term intended, I believe, as one of disparagement, or whether one is regarded as a free-lance journalist, which sounds so much more respectable. The fact remains that one can do some useful work in which he will probably find pleasure for himself, and also that there is money in it: and it is in connection with my own adventures in free-lance journalism that I am mainly writing.

No doubt many of my readers have quite a stock of platitudes about the press, and none wish for any homilies from me about the road to success in journalism or in any other spheres of work. As regards the former, most pressmen love a joke against themselves. Nobody in the profession ever blushed when told that the person who was most curious about the latest "plowdenism" as it appeared in the daily or weekly papers was none other than the late humorous metropolitan magistrate himself.

But I must venture one piece of what might appear pious wisdom. If one is to do anything at all in journalism, one must like his job so much that he is ready to take it up in season or out. There's no eight-hour day in press work. One of my good scoops came after tea one Sunday evening: it kept me busy for some hours, but the news I had was on the front page of some London papers on the following morning, which suggests that the three hours' work on that Sunday evening was profitable.

If one has a sufficient connection to make it worth his while to devote most of his energy to journalism, even when there is no news about, he can generally find something to do in the way of writing up records of persons or of recurring events. And if one really likes his job, he will find a mighty lot of pleasure in it, and plenty of humour as well.

A free-lance journalist, or, if you like, a penny-a-line local reporter, has to deal with any and every sort of news: sport, local markets, religious meetings, weddings, police work, obituaries, occasional inquests, very occasionally--perhaps--a murder, as well as all sorts of other matters too varied to enumerate. My area consists of two small

towns, one with a population of just over 2,000, and the other of about 3,000, as well as the neighbouring villages; and not a few of my friends have supposed that one cannot find a great deal of news fro such places. But here are a few items which stand out in my memory as amongst those with which I have had to deal:--one technical murder charge, following a double poisoning conspiracy in which one of the parties died and the other, on her recovery, had to answer a charge of murder; a full-blown murder and suicide; a treasure trove inquest; a story of an Iceland wreck, as related by a local sailor on his return home; the discovery of a rusty tin box full of gold coins--~~XXXX~~ 85 pounds--buried in the ground; the theft from a local vicarage of 107 pounds in gold. The fact is that in small communities humanity is almost as varied as in those places in which men and women congregate in larger numbers, and so their doings will be just as varied. We have our crooks amongst the rest. I recall an occasion some years ago when, on my way to the police court, meeting one of our known local characters, and asking him--simply in chaff--if he'd come along with me. "No, thank you," was his reply: and then, in a more confidential manner, "You know they had me once." I later heard that he had advertised sewing machines at half-a-crown each, and on receipt of postal orders from the credulous, had returned a reel of cotton and a needle. Of course he was ultimately apprehended for fraud--but that was before my time in the district.

But while the free-lance must deal with any and every sort of work, he will, if he is wise, select one or two specialities in which to be well versed, regarding which another journalist might on occasion want his help. This will permit him asking on occasion for assistance from a colleague in some other direction. How do I report a cricket match? By getting the information from a cricketer. Sport is not my speciality. How do I deal with matters of local government at Alford or at Mablethorpe? By attending all Council meetings, public inquiries, etc., and by entering in my record books such matters as might prove useful at some future time. Local government and police work I had made myself master of, within certain broad limits--and it has paid. In May, 1924, there was to be an important county council inquiry concerning the proposed amalgamation into one urban area of two seaside places in my area, and I had written to my various provincial dailies for instructions. From the "Yorkshire Post", in addition to instructions about the report of proceedings, came the request, "Could you do us a small leader for the morning of the inquiry?" I could. For I had interested myself in the matter, which had been developing slowly for five years. Now "leaders" of any kind are much more profitable than ordinary reports, and I was able to execute this commission from the "Yorkshire Post" in half an hour.

(Next month I hope to be able to say something about the beginnings and development of my journalistic business.)

II. Beginnings and Development.

A few words concerning the beginnings and development of my activities in journalism may, perhaps, prove of interest to my readers. From the point of view of a free-lance in a small town, the possibilities were decidedly interesting; for, as no single paper had a virtual monopoly of the district--I speak now of weeklies, of course,--quite a number of county papers were in competition, and therefore were in search of local news.

Well, just over twenty years ago, I was convinced that something had to be done besides tuning and music teaching if I was to thrive in this little town of Alford, and its surrounding rural district; and at the end of 1911 I heard that a business man was leaving the town who had been the local reporter to the "Boston Guardian", a side-line which had brought him a few shillings weekly. It seemed to me that, being able to use a typewriter, and having to move all over the district in connection with other business, I could at least manage the job as well as the departing cobbler had done. I wrote to Boston at once, offering my services, saying nothing about blindness, of course; and four days later I was appointed. Of cournalism I knew really nothing at that time, but I attended the various meetings at which news is gathered--the local police court and Council meetings, sports club meetings, property sales, etc.,--to find that I could get down in braille all the information required. I know now that my early reports were not all that they should have been; and I should like here to pay a tribute to the "Boston Guardian", which paper, I feel now, bore with me while I was finding my journalistic feet. Of course the editor soon found out about the blindness from a talkative Alford Gentleman who was at the office some couple of months or so after my appointment; but this was perhaps just as well after I had once got going with the job.

Three years later, another weekly paper was offered to me; and during the war I sent--as a speculation--some copy to a third paper circulating in the district which I found was not being well served, and this led ultimately to my third permanent engagement as correspondent.

The opportunity for more intensive development came after the war, when all the newspapers were seeking to recover lost ground. To any of the provincial morning or evening papers which circulated in my area I sent any interesting news items by way of speculative business. One or two of these efforts were, of course, unrecognized; but in the majority of cases connection was thereby established which has continued ever since; and when a little over nine years ago a murder trial at Alford gave me the opportunity of establishing relations with a number of London dailies,

my position as the local free-lance journalist for Alford and Mablethorpe can be said to have been consolidated. By that time I was the accredited representati ve of four weeklies and five provincial dailies, as well as, for any special news, a number of London dailies. Within the last nine years I have had occasional opportunities of adding to my journalistic connections; and it may interest readers to know that I now correspond regularly with newspapers at Hull, Grimsby, Louth, Lincoln, Boston, Stamford, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds and London.

One thing which the free-lance journalist must realise is that, while he may very properly regard his occupation as a profession, he must bring to bear on his work what might seem very mundane commercial methods. His business is to sell news to whoever may be induced to buy it; and, with the aid of a press directory, many opportunities occur for selling news to papers in distant parts of the country. One knows, of course, that this sort of business has a distinct element of speculation in it. One has frequently no opportunity of seeing a paper say--at Bridgwater--if one operates in Lincolnshire, and must rely upon the honesty of local editors and proprietors to pay a fair thing if one sends a piece of news of special interest in their district. This honest dealing, I hasten to say, can generally be counted on; for what looks more enterprising in the eyes of readers of a Somersetshire weekly than the reading of something like this: "Death of prominent Bridgwater magistrate. Killed on the railway in Lincolnshire. From our special correspondent, Alford, Lincolnshire." Such local news from afar off is so valuable to local editors that they appreciate, and usually reward substantia lly, the enterprise of the far-off free-lance from whom it comes.

Let me illustrate the sort of opportunity which sometimes arises in this connection. Nearly three years ago we had a larceny case at court, the prisoner being one of the more or less itinerant sort of thieves. The bench, after hearing evidence, decided to convict; whereupon the inspector in charge of the case announced that he held warrants for the prisoner's arrest from Derby, Doncaster and Dorking, and the prisoner, pleading guilty to the offences named in these warrants was sentenced on all four counts. Now if time permits, here is work for the afternoon; for after dealing with one's regular papers, one gets to the press directory for papers in the places named. "Wanted at Derby"; "Wanted at Doncaster"; "Wanted at Dorking": these may be your respective headings, for you must convince the editors as quickoy as possible that there is local interest in news coming from a stranger; and then you need do little more than repeat your copy. On the occasion in question I simply hadn't time to ring all the changes; but "Wanted at Derby" came off in both the Derby evening papers.

This brings me to another consideration, which is

that one never knows when something of news value is coming along. I recall a day, some two and a half years ago, on which I had practically nothing to do. All the police could do for me was a common or garden case of sleeping out from Mablethorpe. Having nothing better to occupy me, I strolled into the court, heard the usual uninteresting evidence, followed by the justices' decision to convict. "Do you know anything about the prisoner"? asked the presiding magistrate of the inspector in charge, who replied, "He's been convicted ninety-six times." The prisoner from the dock: "You're wrong, it's a hundred and ten; I've scored my century, and I'm proud of it." "Proud of his century" kept me busy all day, the more so because it was the cricket season. It was a tit-bit which went all the way, and in due course brought home several small cheques from London and elsewhere.

Lende

PLEASURE AND PROFIT IN JOURNALISM

Taken from the Tribune for March, 1932.

III PROCEDURE

As the intention of the present series of articles is to demonstrate that journalism may prove both an interesting and a profitable occupation for a number of sightless people, it may be well at this stage if I say a few words about my modus operandi. Of course, the braille dotter takes the place of the fountain-pen or pencil, and thin braille paper that of the ordinary note-book. This latter is desirable so as to reduce to a minimum the sound of brailling; and thus armed, with the use of copious abbreviations I take down police cases, council meetings, inquests, bazaar openings, resumes of political speeches, etc. For the rest, under ordinary circumstances I type off my reports for dispatch either by rail or post; but if the report is considered of sufficient importance to be required at the earliest possible moment, the matter is still easier, for then I just read off from my braille notes at the telephone, putting grammar right as I go along.

Many blind people are fortunate in possessing good memories, than which there can be few more valuable assets. I remember once being nearly caught out with an important inquest. It was one of those occasions, such as every journalist will experience on occasion, when I was in a hole and had to get out of it. It was in the very early days of my intensive journalism, somewhat over ten years ago. I had set off to Mablethorpe for a day's music teaching, but heard on arrival at a wayside station that there had been a drowning fatality the previous evening. This, of course, meant an inquest, which on arriving at the seaside I found was to be at ten o'clock, and I hadn't my braille frame with me! The only thing to be done was to memorise names and addresses of witnesses together with the principal points in the evidence of each; and between each music lesson throughout that day I mentally ran through the details until reaching home at tea-time. But it was all right: my memory did not play me false, for I got out all the reports required, including a special one for an evening paper in Huddersfield, in which town lived the parents of the drowned youth.

But while a good memory can be, and is most certainly, very helpful, I would say to any aspiring blind journalist: "Don't tax your memory more than is absolutely necessary." You will require the aid of memory quite sufficiently in any case, and so get your news into braille whenever possible, if only it is the briefest note of the matter to be later dealt with at the typewriter.

The next most useful tip I can offer is to make plenty

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of friends of the right sort, and, having made them, make judicious--always decent--use of them. It may seem curious, but it is a fact that numbers of people rather like being implicated in getting something into the papers, and so your friends will rather enjoy helping you. Make yourself useful to those who may be of use to you. I have found the police, within proper limits, always helpful; and this I can say concerning most other officials as well, including clerks to councils, the district coroner, and others. Sometimes, in return, you may help any of these gentlemen with a little information of which they may be in search, and of which you may already be possessed. If you can sing or play, make yourself available as an artist for social functions; it is the surest way of securing press tickets, and dinners, besides being happy affairs, provide good copy. In matters of social entertainment, a blind journalist is at least on level terms with his sighted confrere. And if you are in for journalism seriously, of course you must have a telephone, and you mustn't be afraid t use it. It saves many a journey, brings in lots of news, and aids in getting off imporatnt matter with the minimum of effort.

And one final observation as to the important factors making for profitable journalism. You've never learned all there is to be known about your job, so be ready all the time to profit from better men than yourself. If one has passed through a routine apprenticeship in a newsoffice, one knows a good deal about methods of working by the time that he comes to operate on his own account; but if, as in my own case, one takes up the work with just a natural inclination for it but without the routine training, one has just all of it to learn, and so must for a time move cautiously, being ready in season or out of season to pick up useful hints as to procedure. In this respect I was fortunate in making friends with an able journalist of Louth, who, whenever he saw points about my printed productions which might be improved upon, or whenever he thought he could make a useful suggestion, knew he was on safe ground in offering his advice.

It was from the late Mr. T. P. O'Connor that I gleaned, through his admirable obituary notices in the "Daily Telegraph", the idea of preparing in advance records of local people of any importance. How valuable these will ppove at the right moment I need show by only one illustration. The district coroner was dying at Mablethorpe, and I had arranged with a friend to ring me as soon as the end came. Arriving in about ten one evening, I was informed by my wife that Mr. R. had rung up a quarter of an hour before to say that the coroner was dead, and that I'd know what to do about it. I had entered his record in my book some eighteen months before; and so, bringing out this book I put four trunk calls through to Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds; and by eleven o'clock I'd earned a sovereign, since this was the sort of late news which was welcomed. It was interesting to me, when in the Conservative Club at Mablethorpe on the

the following morning to notice one of the other members learn of the death of an important fellow townsman through reading of it in the "Yorkshire Post"; and I think my friend Mr. R. was rather pleased to have had a hand in thus getting the news away so promptly.

This record book of mine has been described by one of my friends as my mausoleum; but it can prove useful on occasions other than death. One day, having nothing much on hand, but remembering that one of our more important magistrates was 85 that day, I culled from the mausoleum a few particulars, devised a small paragraph headed "Alford's Octogenarian Magistrate" or "Alford's Grand Old Man", and sent it round. It caught on in several papers quite sufficiently indeed, to produce a good day's pay.

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